

Women's Participation in the Yukon Labour Force

ABSTRACT/RESUME

Près de 59% de femmes figurent parmi la population active du Yukon. Ceci représente le plus haut taux de participation au Canada. Elles sont en général concentrées dans des emplois traditionnels, bien qu'un petit

mais tout aussi important pour l'économie. Nous tenterons ici de décrire la situation de la femme dans ces quatre domaines de travail.

Au sein du gouvernement, les femmes sont concentrées dans les plus bas niveaux ayant des hommes pour chefs de département ou comme professionnels.

by Maureen Jensen

nombre ayant tendance à augmenter, s'infiltrer lentement dans des secteurs économiques à prédominance masculine. Cette infiltration se fait sentir particulièrement dans les industries minières et dans le domaine de la construction. Selon le Centre de la main d'oeuvre, un grand nombre de femmes ont signalé leur intérêt à occuper des emplois de "cols bleus," bien qu'on les empêche de s'y inscrire sous prétexte qu'elles n'ont pas les compétences requises.

Le principal employeur au Yukon est le Gouvernement, aux paliers fédéraux et territoriaux, surtout dans l'industrie minière et dans les explorations. La construction générale et le tourisme y jouent un rôle moins significatif

Les procédures d'embauche du gouvernement tendent à renforcer cette prédominance masculine à cause de ces lignes de conduite établies pour recruter le personnel à "l'extérieur" pour remplir les positions de haute administration et professionnelles, au lieu de prévoir des programmes de formation pour faciliter l'avancement.

Parmi les 400 travailleurs employés dans la plus grande mine du Territoire, une proportion de 9% sont des femmes. Il semble n'exister aucune barrière sexuelle dans les emplois autres que ceux demandant une force physique extrême.

Bien que seulement 3% de la population active dans la construction se compose

de femmes, les entrepreneurs et les dirigeants ont exprimé leur satisfaction envers les travailleuses et consentent à embaucher des femmes pour tout travail.

La majorité des emplois dans l'industrie touristique sont occupés par des femmes. Ces emplois jouent un rôle de service et procurent de l'emploi saisonnier.

La barrière majeure qui se dresse contre la participation des femmes dans des emplois non-traditionnels semble se situer dans le manque de compétences techniques et dans le manque d'occasions à atteindre ces compétences. Un programme d'action positive forcerait peut-être les employeurs à offrir des stages de formation et à changer la répartition des travaux dans la force ouvrière du Yukon.

Yukon--the very name conjures up an image of "boom & bust." From the days of the Dawson gold fields to the intensive mineral development of the 1960s, the men and women willing to face the climate and the isolation have earned, by their very presence in the North, the reputation of "hardy pioneers." On the surface, through the cycles of boom and the intermittent spells of relative inactivity, Yukoners have moved away from their pioneer patterns of life to a lifestyle similar to that experienced by southern Canadians.

Visitors to Whitehorse, the capital, are often heard to remark that the town reminds them of either Dawson Creek, British Columbia, or Red Deer, Alberta. In fact, residents from the North West Territories say that, when they first arrive in the Yukon, they feel they are "leaving the North."

Today, in a period of relative economic quietude, the Yukon is preparing for another period of "boom" in economic development. Even the yearly cycle is one of boom and bust. In the summer, construction, mineral exploration and tourism expand the population to double or triple the resident population of less than 24,000. The air hums with industrial activity; employers must often seek as far as Newfoundland for skilled personnel to complete their projects during the warm weather months. In the winter, the cycle reverses itself. Mining goes on throughout the year, but the industries of construction, exploration and tourism come to a near halt and many people (that is, skilled tradesmen, temporary service industry employees and persons involved as labourers in the construction industry), plan for months of unemployment and either leave the Territory or pursue their own interests while collecting unemployment insurance cheques.

It is expected that over the next ten years Yukoners will experience the construction of a major natural gas pipeline, resource development in

mining, the building of hydro-electric power dams and the Shakwak Project (the paving of the Alaska Highway). The settlement of the Native Land Claims could change the base of the Territory's economy and ongoing National Park development could further stimulate the already booming tourist industry. What this activity will mean to women essentially depends upon their response to the increasing opportunities for participation and advancement in an expanding labour force.

Other than Census data and Labour Canada Statistics, little research is available which would provide some understanding of the current situation with regard to women and employment in the Yukon. Nor is any new work anticipated. Canada Employment and Immigration, in conjunction with the Yukon Government, undertook a survey of the Yukon workforce in the spring of 1978 to determine training interests but this data is not yet available. What is known is that the Yukon has the highest rate of female participation in the work force of any area in Canada. Fifty-eight point seven percent of Yukon women are active in the labour force.

Government at the Federal and Territorial levels is the major Yukon employer; mining and exploration, general construction and tourism play less significant but major roles in the economy. In this paper, an at-

tempt is made to describe the status of women in these four major areas of employment in the hope that with understanding of these areas a partial understanding may be gained of Yukon women in general.

Due to the lack of information from existing sources, interviews were conducted to gather new data. Those interviewed included major employers in the Yukon as well as educators, Canadian Employment and Immigration personnel union officials, and women who, through their employment, have made a significant impact on Yukon society.

Women in Government

Current statistics show in excess of 3000 people either permanently or casually employed by the Federal or Territorial Governments. This figure does not include the people who are employed by Municipal governments or by Indian Bands and organizations. The majority of these people are women, mostly clerks and secretaries. In the professions, women are clustered in the areas of social work, nursing and teaching.

Recently, an increasing number of women have been appearing in non-traditional areas of the civil service, particularly as personnel officers, accountants and administrative officers or assistants. However, even in the fields in which they have traditionally been in the majority, women are concentrated

in the lower levels. Most department heads and professionals at the highest levels are men.

Government recruiting practices tend to reinforce this male dominance because of the policy of recruiting 'outside' to fill top administrative and professional positions rather than providing extensive inservice training to facilitate advancement. In addition, personnel officers of both the Territorial and Federal Government say that the majority of job applications which they receive follow the traditional division of labour and state further that women have shown a reluctance to compete for jobs at the managerial level for which they are qualified.

One reason for the reluctance to compete, they say, is that women are not usually primary wage earners and therefore do not want the pressures or extended working hours implied by the additional responsibility. They also say that women perceived themselves as not having the managerial skills or ability necessary to carry out these functions. It was noted by the personnel officers that during the past three to five years women who are skilled and competitive and who see their employment as a means to an end in itself were more visible. While these women are presently seen as unusual, there is a general opinion that in time, as women gain the skills and

experience, they will fill more positions of increasing responsibility.

Women in Mining and Exploration

Because of the high annual turnover in mine production forces, particularly in resource based single industry towns, management in the industry have begun to look at the resident female population as an available source of labour. Several studies show that a major reason for married employees resigning is the inability of wives to find employment; therefore, it is felt that by hiring both members of a household, it might be possible to reduce the labour force turnover.

One factor that facilitates this process is a trend toward union contracts which require that all personnel other than professionals and journeymen tradesmen be hired at the labourer level and promoted within the ranks to more desirable jobs. Skill is no longer a requirement for a mining job and an unskilled female in theory has as much chance to be hired as a semi-skilled male.

Cyprus Anvil, the largest mine in the Territory, has a production force of approximately 400 workers. Roughly nine percent are women. These women, in the same way as the men, came to the mine as mill labourers and are now scattered throughout the workforce as assayers, shovel operators, truck drivers and warehouse personnel.

There appears to be no sex barrier to any production job other than those few jobs requiring extreme physical strength.

Personnel officials at the mine say that women have proven to be more stable employees, have fewer accidents and become involved in fewer discipline problems than men. They also say that women have shown no reluctance to compete for the more desirable positions in the production force, probably because the role of a mill labourer is so undesirable as to inspire anyone to move onward and upward as quickly as possible. There are, however, no female foremen and no women in top administrative positions at the mine, although the personnel officer in charge of hiring all production workers is a woman. All clerical workers are women. Cyprus Anvil makes no special provisions for separate residential accommodation for women. It has, however, installed separate shower and locker facilities at the mine itself.

The situation at Cyprus Anvil is similar to that in other producing mines in the Yukon Territory. Although research did not produce any figures describing women's participation in mineral exploration, interviews with Yukon-based exploration companies indicated that women were active and have proven to be valuable employees.

Women in Construction

In spite of the fact that women now comprise only two to three percent of the Yukon's construction labour force, contractors and union officials expressed satisfaction with women workers and a willingness to hire women for any job. The barrier to wider participation is the lack of specialized construction skills. Most women now working in construction are unskilled and the vast majority of those who have skills acquired them through on-the-job training. There are three women members of the Carpenters Union, all first year apprentices. Six female compactor operators are members of the Operating Engineers. All began as flagmen on highway construction.

The Tunnel and Rockworkers who represent the labouring occupations within the construction industry, have the highest percentage of female membership of any Local, about twenty out of two hundred members. The number fluctuates and the percentage can be as low as six percent or as high as twelve percent. Most women in this union are either flagmen or manual labourers. In the Teamsters Union approximately five percent of the membership engaged in the traditionally male jobs are women. All are drivers of pilot cars and trucks (longhaul, shorthaul, fuel and cement).

Unionized contractors in the Yukon have no choice but to accept women as their names appear on the hiring lists. All unions, with the exception of the Carpenters and Plumbers, have women dispatchers. These women rigidly enforce dispatch of workers by order of appearance on union lists. This practice ensures female members equal access to all available jobs. When queried about the possible reluctance of employers to accept women, the dispatcher for the Operation Engineers and Tunnel and Rockworkers stated, ". . . if they don't take women, they don't get anybody."

A male respondent, President of one of the Yukon's largest construction companies, said he would hire more women if he could. He had two main reasons for expressing satisfaction with female construction workers:

- a) Women in non-traditional jobs in a largely male setting, tend to work harder, possibly to prove themselves. Their efforts motivate their male co-workers to work harder in order not to be outdone. Productivity then increases.
- b) His experience has also been that women in camps tend to improve the morale of camp residents and the stability of the camps as a whole. An exception would be a situation where there was only one woman in an otherwise all-male camp. There, the effect would be

negative--for both the men and the woman.

According to him, the only special provision his company has made in camps for female workers is the installation of shower curtains in the 'washcars.' He maintains that there have been no complaints. The company makes no special concessions to females for child-care or family problems. All blue collar workers in the company are union members and are expected without exception to conform to the terms of the union contracts. Female office workers, however, are treated in a more paternalistic manner. He views them as loyal supporters and many of them have been with him for years. Clerical staff earn substantially less than women who work on construction and have no union affiliation. This respondent indicated that women showed up as applicants for blue collar jobs about three years ago, and, in response to what he calls 'the times,' he began hiring them. Although they now comprise only about two percent of their labour force, the total number of applications received from women favour blue collar jobs over clerical positions in a ratio of 10:1.

According to the respondent, the most important thing for women to do who are interested in following careers as tradespeople is to get training. Most northern employers will hire

anyone with skills, he says, regardless of sex, but jobs for unskilled persons are few and far between. Expressing a traditional male viewpoint, the respondent predicted that women would not pursue long-term careers in the blue collar trades, primarily because of the onerous working conditions and the current union agreements which make no provisions for assistance with family responsibilities which continue to be socially defined as a woman's role. It was also his opinion that the majority of women would eventually opt for a conventional home and family life, thereby removing themselves from the industry.

Interviews with the management of other construction companies expressed similar views.

Women in Tourism

Tourism is Yukon's largest employer after government and mining. The majority of jobs generated are held by women. Most positions are service oriented and the vast majority provide seasonal employment. Most women who could be classified as being in non-traditional employment within the industry are bartenders. In the Territory, bartenders are usually women because of the general belief that the presence of women in a bar 'adds class' and results in fewer physical disputes. Interviews with women employed as waitresses, barmaids and bartenders

reveal that they prefer these jobs to higher status clerical, sales or secretarial positions, because of higher monetary rewards, greater mobility and people contact.

Women in the tourist industry who serve other women, claim northern women are different from their southern counterparts. Northern women, they say, tip more, pick up more tabs in mixed company and go into bars and dining rooms to eat and drink rather than to come into contact with available males. The women interviewed see themselves as more independent than southern women and say they have to be in order to survive. One of the women interviewed made the statement that every Yukon woman she knows possesses enough transferrable skills to enable her to find employment under even the most depressed economic circumstances.

Tourism appears to offer little potential for any immediate breakthrough for women in terms of advancement. It does, however, provide a good many relatively well paying jobs which require easily obtained skills. In addition it provides a number of part time jobs of which women can avail themselves while maintaining their family responsibilities. High inter-job mobility makes these positions easily available except during winter, when tourism declines drastically. Tourism also provides the majority of

employment opportunities for summer students.

Training

In spite of the fact that only a small percentage of women in the Territory are employed in nontraditional, particularly blue collar jobs, a significant number of women have shown interest in this type of employment and are barred from participation because of their lack of specific skills. According to CEIC's Whitehorse office, forty percent of the inquiries they receive concerning industrial or construction employment are from women. Most of these women, they say, already possess marketable skills of the traditional type, such as clerical and sales and many have high levels of post-secondary education. However, when they learn of the need for skilled personnel, these women are either unable or unwilling to obtain training. In addition, persons who possess a marketable skill are not a priority for placement in CEIC sponsored vocational courses to obtain a new and different skill.

By far the largest number of requests received by Canada Manpower for personnel to fill highpaying jobs are in the specialized blue collar trades. There is little opportunity, however, for students in the Yukon to receive training in the trades immediately upon graduation from high school, and,

indeed, vocational counselling does not appear to be pointing students in that direction. The vast majority of Yukon students receiving post-secondary educational grants are attending college or university and, while a large number of women are studying in non-traditional areas, the greatest percentage of women by far are in the fields of nursing or teaching. In spite of the fact that there is a large surplus of teachers in Canada, there exists in the Yukon a recently established teacher training program. Again, the majority of participants are female.

Satisfactory training in the specialized blue collar trades requires completion of an apprenticeship program, and there are few situations in the Territory which provide this opportunity. According to union officials, the main reason is that there is an extreme shortage of journeymen qualified to supervise. There is also a reluctance among the larger contractors to accept first or second year trainees. Persons completing a pre-apprenticeship program usually must gain experience in residential, non-union construction before they can proceed with their apprenticeship.

The Whitehorse Vocational School offers training in a variety of trades and occupations ranging from clerical work and bookkeeping to nursing and auto mechanics. It also offers pre-

apprenticeship programs in heavy equipment operation, carpentry, electrician training and plumbing. Most of the slots in the school are purchased by CEIC and are available only to persons who have been out of school for at least one year. In the traditionally male areas, only drafting has seen a significant increase in female participation. More than half the students in this field are now women. In the blue collar areas, female participation hovers around one percent.

A major reason for this lack of female participation could be the fact that most of the blue collar trades require several years of training and women who show interest in these areas already possess marketable skills--usually in the secretarial field and find it difficult to invest the time or the money required to change their field of endeavour, even if the training were available. The Yukon Vocational School has no provision for non-government sponsored students and most men who apply for training at the vocational school possess no specialized skills at all and receive government sponsorship. Even in the clerical areas, most female students possess some rudimentary office skills and are at the school only for upgrading purposes. Women with marketable skills cannot get government assistance and cannot attend the school as fee payers and thus are unable to change their skill area.

Related Findings

During the course of this study, a number of facts have become apparent with regard to the Yukon woman: Of four members of the Territory's Executive Committee (an ExCom member is the Territorial equivalent of a Provincial Minister), two are women. The mayors of the Territory's only two cities are women and a woman is head of one of the Territory's major political parties. Women sit on municipal councils, on the Board of Local Improvement Districts, Indian Band Councils and are members of many influential boards and head of many civic organizations.

Among the Yukon native population women have always assumed leadership roles behind the scenes and are now emerging in highly visible positions, both within the Indian organizations and in career positions, particularly in government service. One factor in this emergence is that Indian women are either tending to remain in school or are returning to school. Secondary school enrollment figures reflect this fact. Up to grade 8, school records indicate almost equal enrollment figures for Indian males and females. Beyond grade 8 and/or minimum school leaving age, females outnumber males by a ratio of 2.5:1. In addition, of persons enrolled in the basic education program in native communities, the vast majority are women. According to a high official in a leading Indian or-

ganization, one reason for this phenomenon could be the traditional Indian male identification with such 'rough and ready' occupations as, first, hunting and trapping and later, construction work. In order to 'grow up,' Indian youth drop out of school and education becomes 'women's work.' This education bears fruit in later life. The respondent estimated that about seventy percent of the board members of his organization are women.

Women have also begun to emerge as business people in the Yukon. Nine percent of all business licences are held by women, with the majority being concentrated in the retail trade sector.

Some Predictions

In spite of the lack of quantifiable data, it is possible to make some general predictions about the impact of heavy industrial development on the patterns of employment among Yukon women. As our research has indicated, women in the Yukon are by and large concentrated in the traditional places of employment. A small, apparently increasing, number are beginning to participate in the male dominated segments of the economy, particularly in the mining and construction industries. The most significant fact uncovered is the high interest shown by women in the areas of blue collar employment and the fact that most of the interest is shown by women who are either already employed or who possess

easily marketable skills, such as secretarial or service. Furthermore, employers and male union officials indicate a high degree of receptiveness towards hiring women. These two factors would seem to be sufficient motivation for a large increase in the number of women in non-traditional jobs. But that increase is not occurring.

The major barrier to women's participation appears to be a lack of skills, and more importantly, lack of opportunity for training or skill development. If the chance for re-training were there, or if the labour situation was sufficiently critical that employers were forced to provide this re-training, it can be predicted that a large number of females would leave their present low-paying clerical or service jobs in favour of higher-paying blue collar employment. Opportunities for re-training both men and women are expected to be greater in the future. One of the major developments pending in the Yukon is the Alaska Highway Pipeline Project. The contract conditions (presently in draft form) which have been developed for the project provide for preferential hiring of Yukoners. Within these stipulations, companies will be required to file with the Federal Northern Pipeline Agency Affirmative Action Plans for women and natives. Without an Affirmative Action Plan, contractors will not be eligible to compete for contracts on

the project. Furthermore, their terms and conditions state that the company, their contractors and unions, in conjunction with government, will provide training programs for qualified Yukon residents. To qualify as a Yukon resident for purposes of affirmative action, an individual either has to have been born in the Yukon or have been enrolled in the Yukon Health Care Plan as of August 1, 1977.

There is evidence to suggest that governments, which are the largest employer of women in the Yukon, will be under a great deal of pressure from within and without to establish their own Affirmative Action Plans. Presently, within the Yukon Territorial Government, there exists a movement to establish a women's bureau. One of the objectives of such a bureau would be the implementation of an Affirmative Action Plan. Government would probably be forced to take this action in order to maintain a competitive position in the demand for labour.

In order for women to take advantage of any Affirmative Action Plan, there will need to be a change in support systems such as child-care and family organization. It can further be expected that if women opt to participate in industrial development in non-traditional ways, a labour supply shortage in traditional female jobs will emerge.

Increasing job opportunities for women may eventually result in an equalization of male and female participation rates in the labour force. This trend is already occurring as seen in Census data since 1951. In 1951 the female participation rate was 22.7 percent. In 1976 the rate had climbed to 58.7 percent, as contrasted to males who show a decline from 92.3 percent in 1951 to 71.1 percent in 1976.

While it is possible to predict an acceleration of emerging patterns in female labour force participation, it is not possible to predict what shape the distribution of women in the labour force will take until Affirmative Action Plans have been implemented and monitored. Clearly, the opportunities for women will be there. However, the degree to which real changes in the labour force will come about depends on women's response to Affirmative Action and their pressure for change in support systems, as well as the response of government and industry.